DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 333 CE 075 732

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TITLE Literacy Skills of Adults and Potential College Students.
INSTITUTION American Council on Education, Washington, DC. GED Testing Service.
PUB DATE 1995-00-00
NOTE 13p.
AVAILABLE FROM American Council on Education/GED Testing Fulfillment Service, P.O. Box 261, Annapolis Junction, MD 20701; phone: 301/604-9073; fax: 301-604-0158 ($5 plus $2.50 shipping and handling).
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Research (143)
JOURNAL CIT ACE Research Briefs; v6 n4 1995
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Adult Literacy; Adult Students; Blacks; Certification; College Graduates; Demography; *Educational Attainment; Educational Certificates; Equivalency Tests; *High School Equivalency Programs; High School Graduates; Hispanic Americans; *Outcomes of Education; Program Effectiveness; Scores; Test Norms; Whites
IDENTIFIERS *General Educational Development Tests; *National Adult Literacy Survey (NCES)

ABSTRACT

A study was made of the prose, document, and quantitative literacy skills of adults in the United States by their highest level of educational attainment. In addition, the study examined the literacy skills of recent General Educational Development (GED) graduates. The data used in the study came from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, and the 1993 GED-NALS Comparison Study. Highlights of the findings include the following: (1) adults with a college education demonstrated higher levels of literacy skills than their counterparts with little or no college education; more than 70 percent of college graduates demonstrated moderate to high levels of literacy skills; (2) adults whose highest educational attainment was a GED credential or a high school diploma had the same average literacy skills, and about one-half of these adults demonstrated moderate to high levels of literacy skills; (3) among both college-educated adults and adults without college degrees, whites demonstrated higher average literacy skills than their African American and Hispanic counterparts in all three measures of literacy; and (4) among recent GED graduates, about 65 percent demonstrated moderate to high levels of literacy skills in prose and document tasks and nearly 57 percent performed at those levels in quantitative literacy. (KC)

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Research Briefs

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HIGHLIGHTS

- As expected, American adults with a college education demonstrated higher levels of literacy skills, on average, than their counterparts with little or no college education. More than 70 percent of these adults demonstrated moderate to high levels of literacy skills in prose, document, and quantitative tasks in 1992.
- Adults whose highest educational attainment was a GED credential or a high school diploma had the same average literacy skills in prose, document, and quantitative tasks. Nearly one-half of these adults demonstrated moderate to high levels of literacy skills in these tasks.
- Among both college-educated adults and adults without college degrees, whites demonstrated higher average literacy skills than their African American and Hispanic counterparts in all three measures of literacy.
- Among recent GED graduates, about 65 percent demonstated moderate to high levels of literacy skills in prose and document tasks; nearly 60 percent performed at moderate to high levels of quantitative literacy.

Literacy Skills of Adults and Potential College Students

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JANET BALDWIN

The adult population of the United States continues to grow older and more diverse in racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. At the same time, the changing nature of work, new technologies, and global competition are creating greater needs for worker training and continuous upgrading of skills. These accelerating social and economic changes have led to increasing concern about the literacy skills of the nation's adults. As a result, one of the National Education Goals calls for every adult to be literate and to possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy by the year 2000.

This brief describes the prose, document, and quantitative literacy skills of adults in the United States by their highest level of educational attainment. These skills and education levels represent national benchmarks of literacy among adults who have completed various levels of education. In addition, the brief examines the literacy skills of a specific group of potential college students: recent General Educational Development (GED) graduates (adults who took and passed the GED Tests in 1993), and suggests reasons why this population merits closer attention by the higher education community.

Are highly educated adults more literate than their less-educated counterparts? Do the literacy skills of college-educated adults in the United States differ among racial and ethnic groups? How literate are recent GED graduates? This information can help provide college and university leaders with a framework for evaluating the literacy skills of college students.

The data used in this brief came from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and the 1993 GED-NALS Comparison Study. The NALS study assessed the English-language literacy skills of a national sample of adults in the United States by asking them to respond to different literacy tasks. Based on their responses to these tasks, adults received proficiency scores along three

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scales which reflected their levels of skill in prose, document and quantitative literacy. The American Council on Education (ACE) and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) jointly conducted the GED-NALS study to assess the English-language literacy skills of a national sample of adults who recently took the GED Tests.

In its 1994 report, the National Education Goals Panel recommended taking steps to increase the percentage of adults who score at the highest three of five levels of literacy as measured by the NALS scales. This percentage would be a national indicator for improving adult literacy. Literacy proficiency results are reported on score scales of 0 to 500 points. These scores are grouped into five levels, with level 1 being least proficient and level 5 being most proficient. In this brief, the five levels of literacy are grouped into low (Levels 1 and 2) and moderate to high (Levels 3, 4, and 5) levels of proficiency in prose, document, and quantitative tasks. (See "Literacy and the NALS" sidebar for examples.)

Literacy Skills of Adults in Prose Tasks

The literacy skills of American adults in prose tasks varied with their level of education. Generally, adults with more years of formal education demonstrated higher levels of literacy skills. The data in Figure 1 show that in 1992:

- Only 19 percent of adults who completed nine to 12 years of formal education without earning a diploma performed at moderate to high levels of prose literacy.

LITERACY AND THE NALS

What is literacy? In previous decades, literacy skills were defined as the ability to read and write. Increasingly, literacy is viewed more broadly as a continuum of skills needed to understand, process, and use information. For the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), literacy was defined as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Kirsch, *et al.*, 1993). In the NALS, literacy scores are reported on scales of 0 to 500 points. These scores are grouped into five levels, from least proficient (Level 1) to most proficient (Level 5) in prose, document, and quantitative tasks.

Some examples of literacy tasks at different levels of difficulty on the NALS include:

PROSE

Low Proficiency: Level 1 (0 to 225 score points); Level 2 (226 to 275 score points)

- Locate one piece of information in a sports article.
- Interpret instructions from an appliance warranty.

Moderate to High Proficiency: Level 3 (276 to 325 score points); Level 4 (326 to 375 score points); Level 5 (376 to 500 score points)

- Write a letter about an error that appears on a credit card bill.
- Read a news article about technologies, then contrast two opposing views presented.
- Read a page of information about jury selection, then summarize two ways that lawyers may challenge prospective jurors.

DOCUMENT

Low Proficiency: Level 1 (0 to 225 score points); Level 2 (226 to 275 score points)

- Locate time of meeting on a form.
- Identify and enter background information on application for social security card.

Moderate to High Proficiency: Level 3 (276 to 325 score points); Level 4 (326 to 375 score points); Level 5 (376 to 500 score points)

- Interpret a graph which estimates power consumption for different years by energy source.
- Use table of information to determine pattern in oil exports across years.
- Use information in a table to analyze the results of a survey and write a paragraph summarizing the results.

QUANTITATIVE

Low Proficiency: Level 1 (0 to 225 score points); Level 2 (226 to 275 score points)

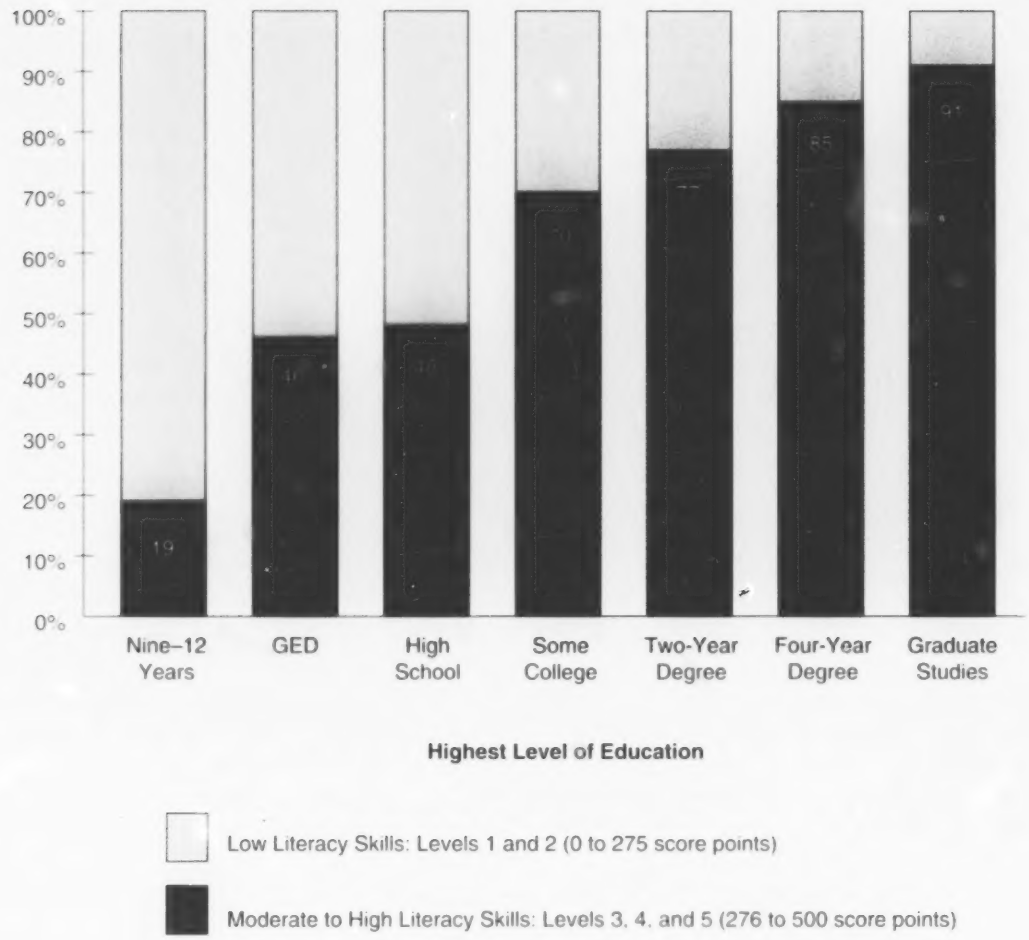
- Add two numbers on a bank deposit slip.
- Determine the difference in price between tickets for two shows.

Moderate to High Proficiency: Level 3 (276 to 325 score points); Level 4 (326 to 375 score points); Level 5 (376 to 500 score points)

- Use calculator to determine discount from an oil bill if paid within ten days.
- Use information in a news article to calculate cost of raising a child.
- Calculate total cost of carpet to cover a room.

Figure 1

Literacy Skills of Americans in Prose Tasks, by Highest Level of Education Completed



SOURCE U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *National Adult Literacy Survey*, 1992.

- Nearly one-half of adults whose highest level of education was a GED credential (46 percent) or a high school diploma (48 percent) performed at moderate to high levels of prose literacy.
- Seven in ten adults (70 percent) with some college education, but no degree, demonstrated moderate to high levels of prose literacy.
- More than three-fourths (77 percent) of two-year degree-holders performed at moderate to high levels of prose literacy.
- More than eight in ten (85 percent) bachelor's degree-holders demonstrated moderate to high levels of prose literacy.
- Most adults (91 percent) with graduate-level studies performed at moderate to high levels of prose literacy.
- Low levels of prose literacy skills were demonstrated by 23 percent of two-year degree-holders, 15 percent of four-year degree-holders, and 9 percent of those with graduate-level studies.

Literacy Skills of Adults in Document Tasks

College-educated adults also showed higher levels of literacy skills in document tasks than adults without a college education. The data in Figure 2 show that in 1992:

- Only 17 percent of adults who completed nine to 12 years of formal education without earning a diploma demonstrated moderate to high levels of document literacy.
- About two in five adults whose highest level of education was a GED credential (41 percent) or a high school diploma (43 percent) performed at moderate to high levels of document literacy.
- Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of those who had some college education, but no degree, demonstrated moderate to high levels of document literacy.
- Seven in ten (71 percent) adults with two-year degrees demonstrated moderate to high levels of document literacy.
- Four in five (81 percent) bachelor's degree-holders performed at moderate to high levels of document literacy.
- Nearly nine in ten (87 percent) adults with graduate-level studies had moderate to high literacy skills in document tasks.
- Low levels of document literacy skills were demonstrated by 29 percent of two-year degree-holders, 19 percent of four-year degree-holders, and 13 percent of adults with graduate-level studies.

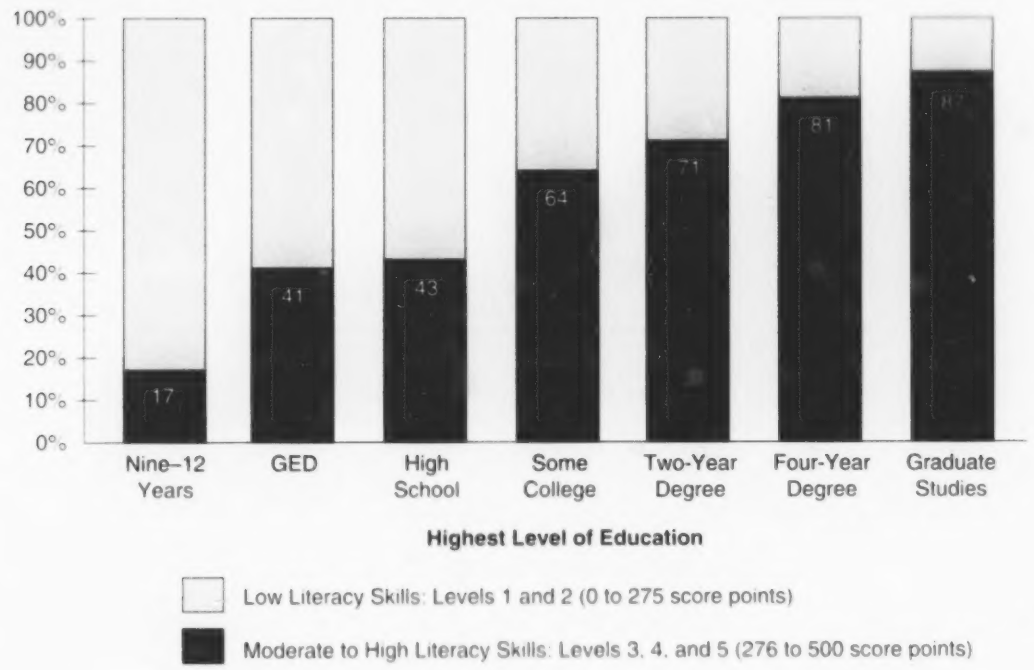
Literacy Skills of Adults in Quantitative Tasks

Again, as they did with prose and document tasks, adults with higher levels of education scored higher on quantitative tasks than adults with lower levels of education. The data in Figure 3 show that in 1992:

- Only 20 percent of adults who completed nine to 12 years of formal education without earning a

Figure 2

Literacy Skills of Americans in Document Tasks, by Highest Level of Education Completed



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *National Adult Literacy Survey*, 1992.

diploma demonstrated moderate to high levels of quantitative literacy.

- Forty-six percent of adults whose highest level of education was a GED credential and 50 percent of adults with a high school diploma performed at moderate to high levels of quantitative literacy.
- Over two-thirds (69 percent) of adults with some college education, but no degree, demonstrated moderate to high levels of quantitative literacy.
- More than three-quarters (77 percent) of two-year degree-holders performed at moderate to high levels of quantitative literacy.
- More than four-fifths (85 percent) of bachelor's degree-holders demonstrated moderate to high levels of quantitative literacy.
- Most (89 percent) adults with graduate-level studies performed at moderate to high levels of quantitative literacy.
- Low levels of quantitative literacy skills were demonstrated by 23 percent of adults with two-year degrees, 15 percent of those with four-year degrees, and 11 percent of those with graduate-level studies.

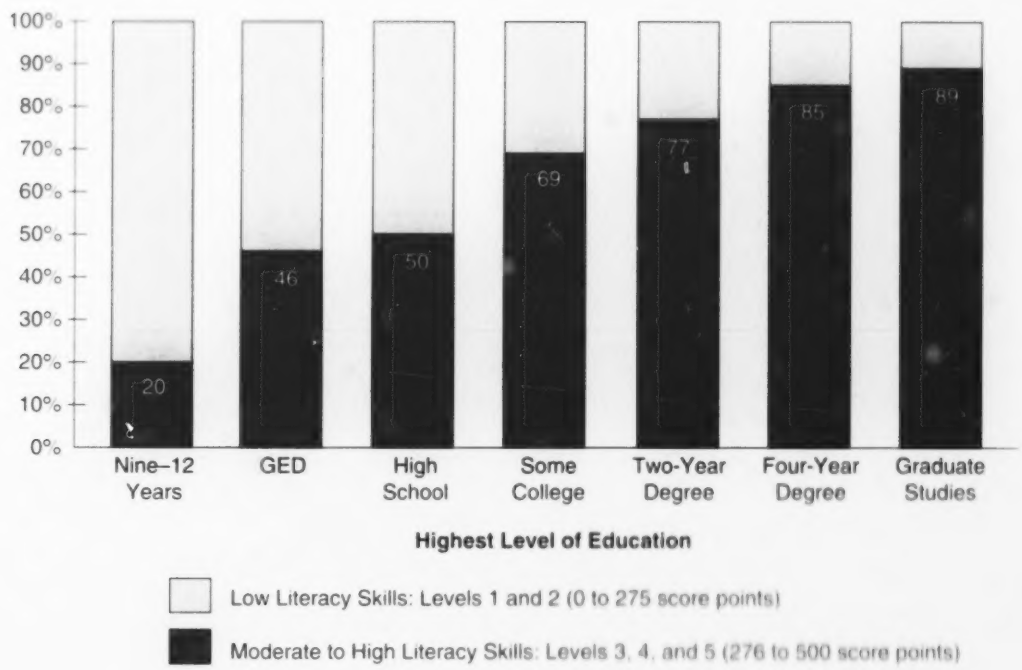
Overall, about three in four adults who had earned at least a two-year college degree performed prose, document, and quantitative tasks at moderate to high levels of literacy. However, a small portion of college-educated adults still had low levels of literacy skills. The proportion of American adults in this group ranged from about one in four of those with only two-year degrees to about one in ten of those with graduate-level studies. This population needs to be studied to learn why some college-educated adults still demonstrate low levels of literacy skills.

Literacy Skills by Race/Ethnicity

Among adults in the United States, literacy skill gaps exist between whites and people of color across all levels of education. On average, literacy scores increased with higher levels of education for white, African American,

Figure 3

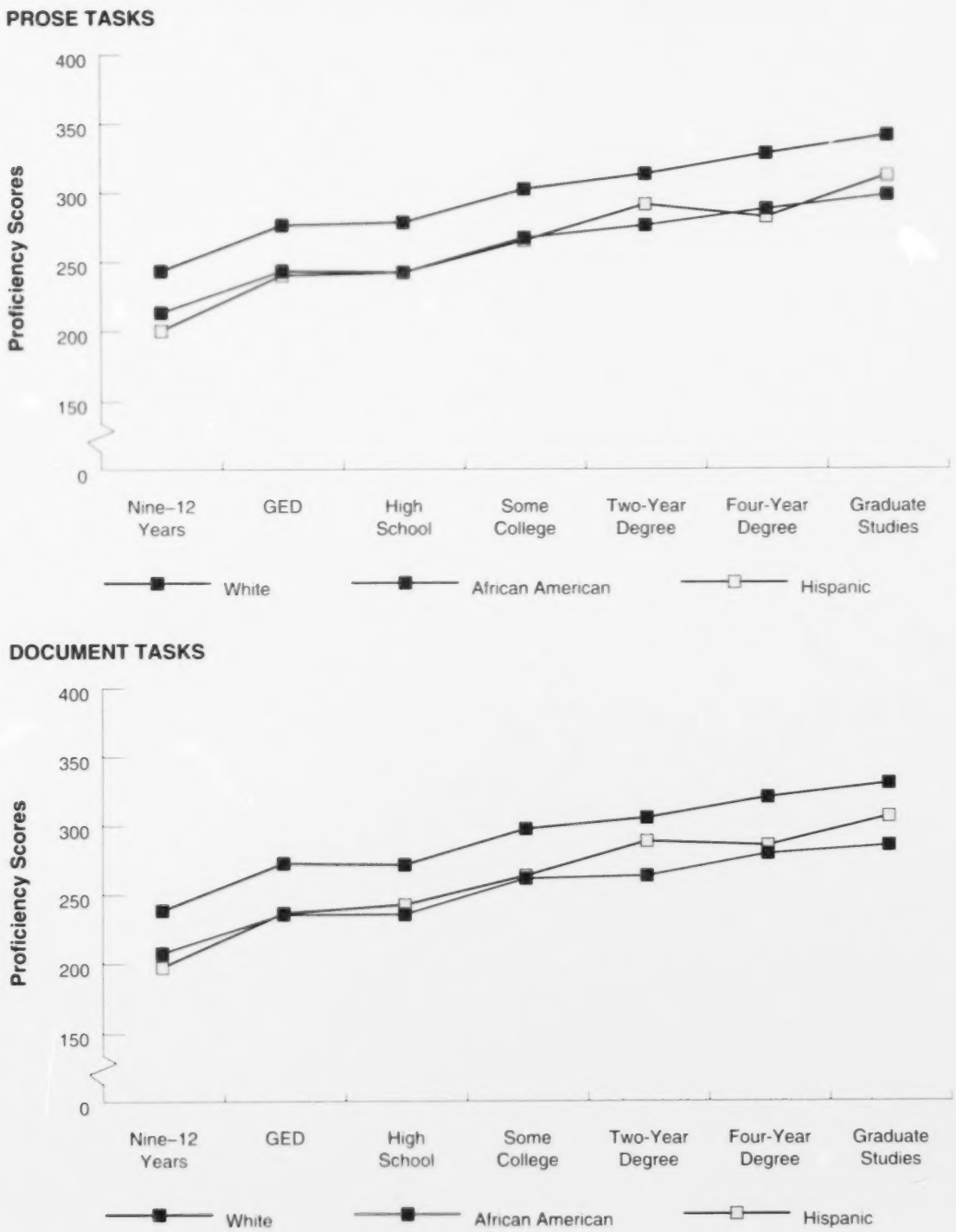
Literacy Skills of Americans in Quantitative Tasks, by Highest Level of Education Completed



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *National Adult Literacy Survey*, 1992.

Figure 4

Average Literacy Proficiency Scores* of White, African American, and Hispanic Adults in the United States, by Highest Level of Education



Literacy proficiency scores are reported on scales of 0 to 500.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *National Adult Literacy Survey*, 1992.

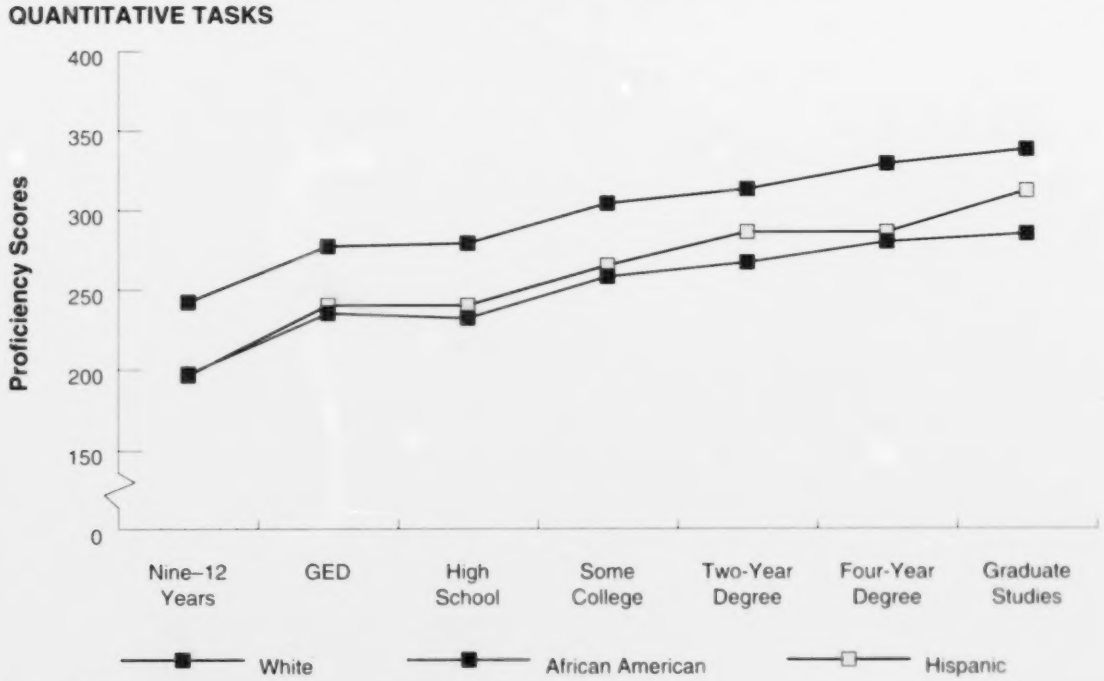
and Hispanic adults. However, on a scale of 0 to 500 score points, whites had higher average scores in prose, document, and quantitative literacy tasks than did people of color at each level of education.

In general, literacy gaps between whites and Hispanics appear to narrow with more years of education, except for bachelor's degree-holders. By contrast, literacy gaps between whites and African Americans remained relatively constant at each level of education. In 1992 (Figure 4):

- Among adults whose highest level of education was a high school diploma:
  - Whites recorded an average score of 278 in prose tasks, compared with 242 for Hispanics and African Americans.
  - On document tasks, whites scored an average of 271, Hispanics 242, and African Americans 235.
  - Average scores on quantitative tasks were 279 for whites, 240 for Hispanics, and 232 for African Americans.
- For adults whose highest level of education was a GED credential:
  - Whites recorded an average score of 276 in prose tasks, compared with 240 for Hispanics and 243 for African Americans.
  - On document tasks, whites scored an average of 272, Hispanics 236, and African Americans 235.
  - Average scores for quantitative tasks were 277 for whites, 240 for Hispanics, and 235 for African Americans.
- Among adults whose highest level of education was an associate degree:
  - Whites recorded an average score of 313 in prose tasks, compared with 291 for Hispanics and 276 for African Americans.
  - On document tasks, whites scored an average of 305, Hispanics 288, and African Americans 263.

Figure 4 (continued)

Average Literacy Proficiency Scores* of White, African American, and Hispanic Adults in the United States, by Highest Level of Education



Literacy proficiency scores are reported on scales of 0 to 500.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *National Adult Literacy Survey*, 1992.

- Average scores for quantitative tasks were 313 for whites, 286 for Hispanics, and 267 for African Americans.

- Among adults whose highest level of education was a four-year degree:

  - Whites recorded an average score of 328 in prose tasks, compared with 282 for Hispanics and 288 for African Americans.

  - On document tasks, whites scored an average of 320, Hispanics 285, and African Americans 279.

  - For quantitative tasks, average scores were 329 for whites, 286 for Hispanics, and 280 for African Americans.

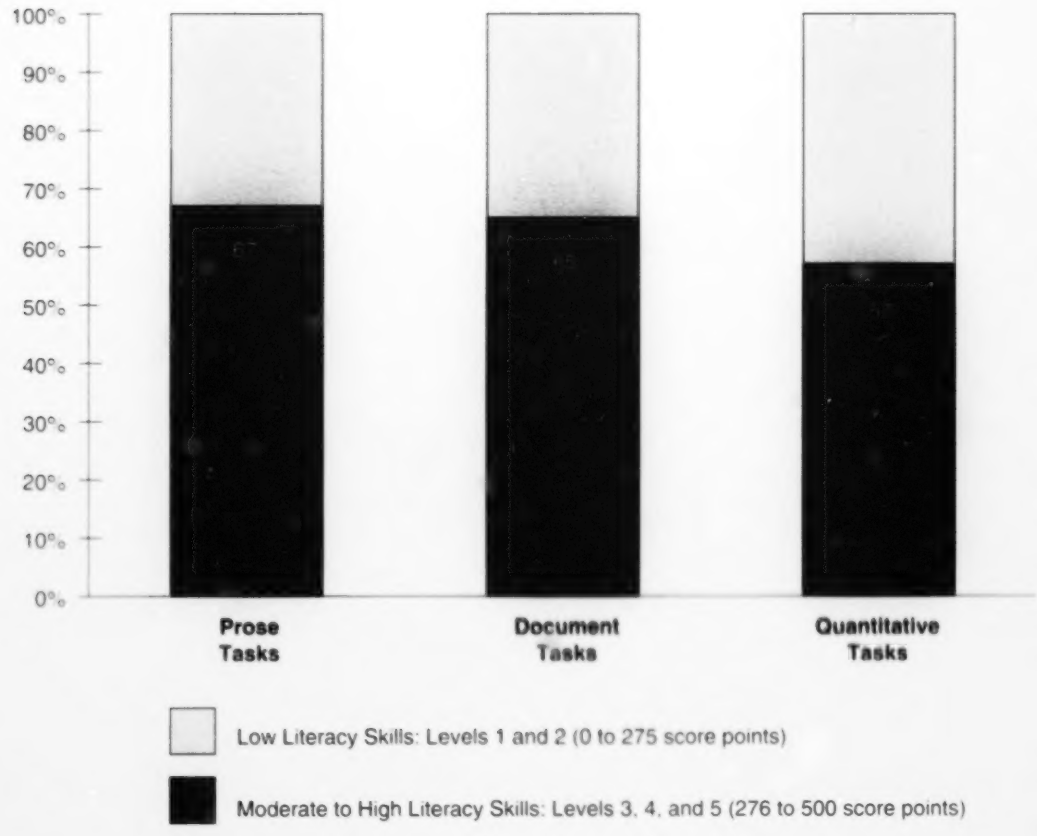
GED Graduates as Potential College Students

For many college administrators, recent high school graduates are among the first to be considered as potential college students. Although there are no 1993 national data to compare the literacy skills of recent high school graduates with those of recent GED graduates, national studies such as the NALS support the conclusion that GED graduates have skills that are comparable to those of high school graduates. Recent research presented in this section suggests that GED graduates also are strong candidates for college-level work.

In 1993, ACE and ETS jointly conducted a study of a national sample of adults who took the GED Tests. The GED-NALS Comparison Study, employing the same literacy measures that were used in the NALS study, assessed the skills of recent GED test-takers to obtain more com-

Figure 5

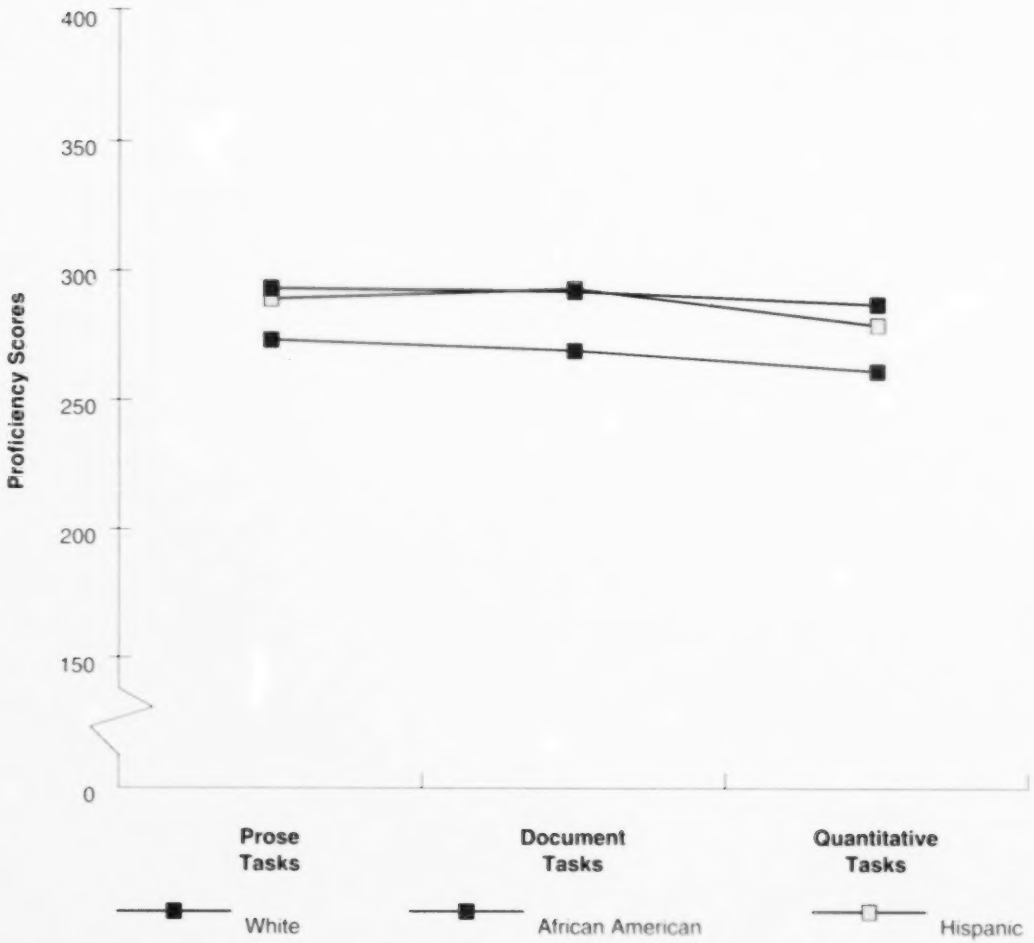
Literacy Skills of Recent GED Graduates in Prose, Document, and Quantitative Tasks



SOURCE: American Council on Education and Educational Testing Service, *GED-NALS Comparison Study*, 1993.

Figure 6

Average Literacy Proficiency Scores* of Recent GED Graduates by Race/Ethnicity



*Literacy proficiency scores are reported on scales of 0 to 500.

SOURCE: American Council on Education and Educational Testing Service. *GED-NALS Comparison Study*, 1993.

plete information about this important population of potential college students. The data in Figure 5 describe the literacy skills of recent GED graduates in 1993:

- About two-thirds of recent GED graduates demonstrated moderate to high literacy skills in prose (67 percent) and document (65 percent) tasks.
- Nearly three-fifths (57 percent) of recent GED graduates performed at moderate to high levels of quantitative literacy.
- Among recent GED graduates, average literacy scores were nearly the same for whites and Hispanics, while African Americans had lower average scores on all three measures (Figure 6):
  - In prose tasks, whites recorded an average score of 294, compared with 290 for Hispanics and 274 for African Americans.
  - On document tasks, average scores were almost the same for whites (293) and Hispanics (294); African Americans recorded an average score of 270.
  - In quantitative tasks, whites had an average score of 288, compared with 280 for Hispanics and 262 for African Americans.

Recent GED graduates demonstrated moderate to high levels of literacy skills and were largely college-bound. Indeed, most (87 percent) of these adults reported that they plan to pursue certificates or degrees beyond the high school level. Thirty-one percent planned to earn vocational certificates, while 56 percent planned to earn two-year, four-year, or advanced degrees. Moreover, GED graduates who attend college perform well. A recent study (Kroll, 1993) that analyzed the performance of students in two-year colleges found that GED and high school graduates were comparable in average grades earned, the number of credit hours completed in a semester, and aspirations to go on to a four-year degree.

Conclusions

Monitoring literacy skills of adults is important to the higher education community to ensure that college students are acquiring the level of skills necessary to compete in a global economy and to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. As the data in this report suggest, a small proportion of college-educated adults still perform poorly in prose, document, and quantitative tasks. By offering programs to improve skill levels, colleges can help meet the challenges stated in the National Education Goals on adult literacy.

Large gaps in literacy skills remain between whites and people of color, even among those with college degrees. Differences in English-language proficiency may be influenced by many factors, such as years of schooling, quality of education, and access to educational materials and experiences, as well as by country of birth, language spoken at home, and other social and economic factors. Literacy skills and educational attainment are strongly related. Thus, improving literacy skills may play an important role in narrowing the substantial gaps between whites and people of color in the rate of college enrollment and college completion.

Although the literacy skills of recent GED graduates were generally high, some of these potential college students may require additional study to develop the skills needed for college work. Nevertheless, GED graduates who attend college may be expected to perform — and indeed are performing — on a par with their traditional high school graduate counterparts. As colleges seek to recruit and retain qualified students, greater consideration should be given to GED graduates, who represent an important pool of motivated and talented college-bound adults. Also, by studying the educational performance and achievements of GED graduates in two-year and four-year colleges, administrators can learn ways to improve the effectiveness of programs for student recruitment, remediation, and placement.

Resources

1. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) annually publishes several compendia of education statistics, including the *Digest of Education Statistics*, *The Condition of Education*, and *Projections of Education Statistics*. In 1992, under contract with NCES, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) assessed the literacy skills of a national sample of all adults in the United States, ages 16 and older, using The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). This study is described in the report, *Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Results of the National Adult Literacy Survey* (Kirsch, *et al.*, 1993). For more information, call NCES at (202) 219-1651 and ETS at (609) 734-1516.

2. The GED-NALS Comparison Study. In 1993, the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) jointly administered the NALS literacy survey to a national sample of adults who had taken the five Tests of General Educational Development (GED). The content of the five GED Tests—Writing Skills, Social Studies, Science, Interpreting Literature and the Arts, and Mathematics—is based on the core curriculum of the nation's high schools; the GED score scale and passing standard are based on the performance of a national sample of graduating high school seniors. To pass the test, examinees must obtain scores comparable to those of the top 70 percent of recent high school graduates. For more information, call ACE/GED at (202) 939-9490 and ETS at (609) 734-1516.

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